

Encountering wildlife without feeding

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Introduction

Feeding wildlife is an exceptionally popular activity and most people will have done it at some time. But is it a good idea? This Note looks at the pro's and con's of feeding wildlife so that you can make better decisions about your own actions.

The main reason people feed wildlife is to have a close encounter with a wild animal. This Note also looks at how close encounters can be obtained without harming wildlife or posing a risk to humans.

Feeding wildlife - issues

There are a number of convincing arguments against feeding wild animals. They include:

- potential dependence on fluctuating food sources supplied by humans, rather than natural sources;
- inadequate dietary balance;
- alteration to the community structure of the animal population, due to increased resources, with potential consequences for other species of plants and animals;
- the potential for transmission of diseases or harmful chemicals as a result of contamination of the food or feeding location or direct transmission between animals at the feeding station. The feeding station may also act as a focus for predators.
- potential conflicts arising between human social and economic needs, and wildlife, including human disease transmission.

Case studies

Choughs and orchids

White-winged Choughs live in eucalypt forests and woodlands, in colonial groups of 2-20 individuals, where their main natural food source is invertebrates. Choughs are large native birds and are an important part of natural ecosystems. They have a lot of character and many landholders enjoy their company.

To the north of Melbourne, Chough numbers have apparently increased as a result of regular feeding with bread supplied by local landholders. When not being supplied with food from our larder, Choughs seek natural foods. Because Choughs are very systematic feeders, working together to locate food items, they can cause considerable disturbance to the bush. One food item that can be severely affected is orchids. The Choughs dig up the orchid tubers, systematically excavating complete colonies. This probably happens in nature to some extent. However, the artificially high numbers of Choughs, and acquired taste for high starch foods, such as bread supplied by people, is having major unnatural consequences for orchid populations in the foothill areas north of Melbourne and perhaps elsewhere. One particularly rare species of orchid has had to be placed in an enclosure to exclude Choughs. The problem is not the Choughs but the imbalance in their numbers brought about by feeding. Choughs *would* benefit from a healthier ground layer of twigs and leaves in which to forage for insect prey.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and house damage

Sulphur-crested Cockatoos can cause considerable damage to

*Area: Statewide
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timber houses, in particular western red cedar window and door frames. Cockatoo beaks grow continuously and regular use is probably important to maintaining beak condition. In the wild, cockatoos have often been observed to bite off twigs and small branches from the trees they are resting in. Cockatoos also excavate holes in the wood of trees in search of wood-boring grubs and enlarge nest hollow entrances using their strong beaks. These activities might help explain why cockatoos like to chew wood.

A common factor, which indirectly contributes to the damage caused by cockatoos to houses, is the provision of food by the victim or a near neighbour which attracts the birds to the area.

Crimson Rosellas

A brilliantly coloured bird, the Crimson Rosella is exquisite to look at and readily becomes tame enough, when fed regularly, to alight on humans. In the wild, wattle and eucalypt seeds form a major part of the diet. At regular feeding sites, large numbers of rosellas may congregate in anticipation of food being provided. These groups typically include a lot of immature individuals which are naturally abandoned by their parents as they become independent.

Problems encountered by artificially fed birds include irregular supply (e.g. a lower number of holiday-makers at parks in winter leaves a reduced food supply), an unbalanced diet of seeds they would not encounter in the wild, and the flocking of starlings with rosellas. Starlings are introduced birds that compete with native wildlife for breeding hollows and can benefit from food left for native bird species.

Red Wattlebirds and beri-beri

Red Wattlebirds are raucous birds common in the dryer forests of Victoria and the suburbs of Melbourne. Occasionally, these birds have been found on the ground convulsing, always in winter months. Frequently, this symptom is followed by death. It has been suggested that the most probable cause of these deaths is thiamine deficiency. Such a disease, in humans, causes the nerve disease beri beri which is characterised by pain and paralysis of the extremities and accompanied by severe emaciation or swelling.

Red Wattlebirds collect their energy requirements from nectar, manna, honeydew or psyllids (sap-sucking insects) which are high in carbohydrates but low in protein. Like all honeyeaters, they require a supplement of insects which supply essential proteins. Red Wattlebirds 'hawk' a number of insects, big enough to supply the needs of this large bird and worth the energy expenditure, from the air each day for this reason. During winter there is a marked deficiency of large insects in Melbourne and so Red Wattlebirds normally migrate to northern Victoria where milder winters support more large insects.

Dr. David Paton, of Adelaide University, has suggested that development of the Melbourne suburbs, which has included planting many nectar-producing shrubs and trees (e.g. Western Australian eucalypts, such as *Eucalyptus caesia*, red-flowering Yellow Gum *E. leucocorylon* var. *rosea*, Red Ironbark *E. sideroxylon* and banksias) may have encouraged Red Wattlebirds to remain in Melbourne over winter.

Sugar solutions supplied in bird feeders by humans may have also contributed to the reluctance



of Red Wattlebirds to head north on their usual migration. Dr. Paton has estimated that a Red Wattlebird would need to consume about 500 small insects per day to obtain the same protein (and thiamine) as is available from large insects during warmer months. This would be a major drain on the time and energy needed to collect and defend major carbohydrate sources (nectar producing plants, such as eucalypts).

So, the birds that remain behind may suffer from inadequate intake of thiamine and suffer the effects of beri beri.

Seed bells

Commercial seed bells are widely available. However, many questions remain unanswered about their potential effect on wild bird populations. What are the levels of pesticides in seed bell grain? What effect does indiscriminate artificial feeding have on wild bird populations? What other ingredients are consumed by birds using seed bells? Wood glues are used to bind the seed together in some bells. Are viable weed seeds present in seed bells that might be spread by birds?

Artificial feeding has the potential to disrupt the dietary balance of natural populations, attract predators, disrupt social behaviour and spread disease. Increased numbers of animals may affect other species in the area.

Kookaburras and minced meat

In nature, Kookaburra families vigorously defend areas of bushland against rival kookaburras. When confronted with their own reflection in a house window they may attack it, thinking it to be another individual. In one extreme case, ten windows were broken. Often the birds are first attracted by the landholder's food offerings. Minced meat, the food usually proffered, is not the same as natural dietary items.

Kangaroos

Kangaroos live in social groups and in the wild consume coarse native grasses and forbs. They are readily attracted to food offerings by humans. Complications that arise include attacks by males, asserting dominance on humans as they vie for female attention during the breeding season (kicks by the hind feet can cause serious injury), physical abnormalities, such as extended toe nail growth due to insufficient movement over hard surfaces, and increased incidence of the disease lumpyjaw which is caused by infection by several organisms entering the jaw around a tooth or via the gums. The main visual symptom of lumpyjaw is an open decaying wound around the jaw area. The common name is derived from the response to infection whereby additional layers of bone are laid down around the infected area.

For the above reasons, and in the best interest of wildlife, *Land for Wildlife* recommends against the feeding of wildlife. However, in instances where it does occur, irregular feeding is preferable to regular feeding and quality foodstuffs from natural sources are better than manufactured products of unknown origin.

Weaning animals off human food sources

For wild animals that are partially dependent on food supplied by humans, it is best to reduce the supply over a period of time, thus forcing the animals to rely on natural sources whilst not causing an immediate food shortage. Wildlife that has been raised in captivity may be entirely dependent on human food sources and expert advice should be sought as to whether release to the wild is an option and legal. Sick or injured animals should be taken to a Wildlife Shelter where experienced carers can look after the animal. Contact flora and fauna staff at your nearest office of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for advice.

How to encounter native wildlife without regular feeding

There are steps that you can take to increase your chances of

encountering native wildlife without the need for regular feeding.

Habitat management

You can improve the management of habitat in the area that you visit to view wildlife. For example, by maintaining a healthy understorey and leaf and twig litter layer and eliminating weeds.

Near the home or viewing area, you may increase the wildlife visiting by planting local native food plants that provide nectar, fruits, different foraging substrates (e.g. bark types) and a shallow source of water for birds away from vegetation that could conceal predators. Old feathers, natural fibres (wool) and short stems of dried grass can be used to attract birds in the breeding season. Place them in a tree or shrub fork, away from potential danger from predators, near a place from where you can observe the animal whilst remaining concealed. A few nest boxes can be added to increase the chance of seeing hollow-nesting and roosting species near your home (see *Land for Wildlife* Note 14 'Nest boxes for wildlife').

Understanding wildlife

Increasing your knowledge of wildlife will help you to locate and view species. Become familiar with the habitats that animals use, their patterns of activity, where they breed, shelter and feed. Waterholes are often good observation points.

Learn how to determine which animals are in the area by looking for tracks and traces left by animals passing by and listening for the noises they make. For the more determined, remotely operated cameras and hides can be used to view wildlife with minimal disturbance. Some excellent audio tapes and videos are available but nothing beats learning from an experienced naturalist or researcher. Fortunately there are many naturalist clubs available in Victoria.

Learning about wildlife and searching for it in the wild, though less predictable than feeding, adds to the adventure of encountering wildlife. Alternatively, some species can be viewed at close hand in captivity (see 'zoos, sanctuaries and animal parks' in the Yellow Pages telephone directory).

Avoiding danger

Although most of our wildlife is harmless, close encounters with some species in the wild poses a degree of risk. Care should be taken whenever you are in bushland areas where the presence of dangerous wildlife may go undetected. Sturdy, protective clothing should be worn and first aid materials kept close at hand. Animals of unknown capacity should be regarded as dangerous until better information is obtained and are best avoided. Attempting to kill the animal increases the risk substantially. Avoidance is a better solution. Close contact with animals during the breeding season should be avoided. Wildlife is more likely to be aggressive at this time and you are more likely to cause disturbance and stress to the animals or their young. Wildlife faeces should not be handled due to potential contamination by disease-causing organisms.

References and further information:

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